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AIAN, ALLY, NATIVE AMERICANS, PRACTICES

Appropriation and Appreciation: What's the Difference?

November 1, 2021
By: Ashley Wells

Photo by Kevin Tachman via Vogue.

Ethnic hairstyles. Sports mascots. Runway fashion. We've all seen examples of cultural appropriation. Yet, the difference between cultural ***appropriation*** and ***appreciation*** is not always clear. Think of cultural appropriation as the "selecting of certain aspects of a culture, and ignoring their original significance."[1] In March 2018, the Oxford English Dictionary defined cultural appropriation as: "The unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one social or ethnic group by members of another (typically dominant) community or society."[2]

Social media, print media, and television programs can inspire us to appreciate the beauty and uniqueness of people from different backgrounds. Appreciating different cultures and traditions is encouraged with some caution—culture is not a hobby or a collectible item, it is a meaningful part of life, identity, and community. To start appreciating a culture different from your own, begin with good intentions and learn about the culture. This involves avoiding the temptation to assign new meaning to "cultural markers (such as food, clothing, or physical appearance)."[3]

Context is critical because it allows us to determine if the intention behind adopting an aspect of a culture is meaningful. While learning about a cultural activity, event, meal, garb, or other cultural aspects from a person within the culture, who enthusiastically agrees to teach you, is a great way to connect and appreciate a culture, buying or using iterations of cultural items (like fast-fashion clothing, furniture, housewares, Halloween costumes, etc.) that give no credit or compensation to the original creator(s) is a form of appropriation. Here is a more specific example:

> *Likewise, feather headdresses are all the rage at music festivals. But these are tribal symbols of spirituality and status that don't have anything to do with these festivals. It's not that it's off-limits to wear accessories from aboriginal cultures,*

> *but context is critical. Does the context of Coachella have anything to do with the culture you're borrowing from? If not, then maybe you shouldn't be wearing that particular accessory. For this reason, some music festival organizers have prohibited feather headdresses.*[4]

Look for obvious context clues. Were you invited to a cultural event and asked to wear traditional clothing? Or did you notice that a culturally inspired style is trending and decide to wear that trendy outfit on your next night out? Appreciating culture often involves community, connection, and learning, whereas appropriation is typically an individual choice influenced by popular media.

So, what are some ways to celebrate a culture without exploiting it? Start with these basic tips:

1. Examine your own culture and beliefs. Knowing your own culture is one of the best ways to understand and appreciate other cultures.[5]
2. Recognize and embrace cultural differences.[6] Allow these differences to spark healthy dialogue.
3. Refrain from using sacred artifacts or symbols from another culture as an accessory.[7]
4. Ask yourself why. Ensure your intentions are sincere and genuine.
5. Be an ally! Engage in important conversations and help others learn about cultural appropriation.

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